



County of Siskiyou



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RUSTY NEISWANGER
County Recording Supervisor

August 4, 2008

Siskiyou County Grand Jury
P.O. Box 488
Yreka, CA 96097

RE: Working Conditions

Dear Sirs:

I have read the findings and conclusions of the 2008 Grand Jury's report regarding my office. With exception of a couple of issues, I concur with the Grand Jury's findings and find the issues to be well presented and fair.

The Auditor's office has experienced some extremely difficult years and we have spent the last two years pulling ourselves up by the boot straps so to speak. The decisions made were mine and I accept full responsibility for them...right or wrong.

The Auditor's office has never been adequately staffed where the workload was "reasonable" in my history with the County covering 26 years. When I started in 1981 as an Account Tech I was stunned at the volume of work that went through the office. I had spent the previous 6 months as an Eligibility Worker for Human Services where the case load was overwhelming, yet was surprised at what I came into when I moved to this office.

I tell those being interviewed for positions in the office that it is unlikely they will ever work anywhere else where so much is expected, where there is a higher volume of work, where your make so few people happy or where what you do is as important. The responsibilities of the office are under recognized and under appreciated; not to mention, under paid.

My management style is very simple. Each employee who works for the Auditor is expected to work hard for the 8 hours the taxpayer is paying for. We work as a team. As the Auditor, I have taken work off the desks of Fiscal Technicians and audited claims both at home, in the office, and in the Board room. Other management levels have done the same. For management to complete their work, we work after hours, on the weekends, early mornings while trying to bring new staff up to speed in their training. My door is open...and staff takes advantage of that. Nothing said within my office is ever held against anyone and I encourage them to challenge each other and to challenge me. They have taken me at my word. If I have a problem with what they are doing, they know about it now. I do not wait for a year when their evaluations are due. If they have a problem with something I am doing, they tell me as well, whether I like it or not.

When staff is new, they tend to be a little uncomfortable with this approach. I go out of my way to make them comfortable. I explain that my job is to make sure they do theirs' properly and their job is to make sure I do mine. If they don't make any mistakes, they don't have enough to do. The only

mistake that cannot be fixed is lying. I have absolutely no tolerance of dishonesty. New staff is told that prior to coming to work yet some have left for exactly that reason.

I do not tolerate anyone being disrespectful to another employee whether being a peer, a supervisor, or a subordinate. In instances when that occurred, it was a disciplinary issue which rarely went beyond the verbal discussion. Just because staff did not see disciplinary action, does not mean it did not occur. It means it was done correctly.

During the budget crises of about every other year lately, I was called upon to reduce staff. **I made a significant error when I allowed it to happen.** I was told that "we all needed to do more with less" and then "we all needed to do less with even less". I felt it was important to set an example when other departments were being asked to cut staff. The office lost five positions all of which worked a 40 hour plus work week. When staff was added back to the County, it was not added back in the Auditor's office. I was finally able to convince the Board that we were going under and they approved adding one Fiscal Tech and later an Accountant/Auditor. A good portion of my argument to the Board was that my staff was burning out...and they did. I did not argue my case well enough in previous discussions with the Board and failed to make them understand what was happening due to the cuts.

There were positives that came out of that hardship. We evaluated every single task in detail to determine how to accomplish it more efficiently and "if" it needed to be done at all. Some things that should have been done were not done and were picked up again when the restructure was completed.

Each person who worked in our office and now works for another office has taken a level of skill with them they would never have had without this experience. I see that as a positive result.

Two persons left because they were passed over for a promotion. That decision was a correct decision and I would make the same choices again. Those individuals are well aware of their areas of deficiencies and were counseled on improvement programs that would allow them to promote in the future. There have been others who were also passed over for promotion, counseled on an improvement program that they followed through with and have been subsequently promoted. As for other reasons for turnover, those are experienced everywhere.

The conclusions listed are outdated at this point in time. The perception of a hostile work environment was a direct result of overworked staff with no light at the end of the tunnel at all and a department head that was repeatedly unsuccessful at resolving the problem with the Board of Supervisors. The workload for the current Fiscal Technicians is still very high and the current employees in those positions are still in a learning mode. Resolution to any problem in this office has **always** been a possibility **and** a reality for those who brought them forward with the exception of work load. The resolution, however, was not always to their liking.

While current staff has been learning their job for over a year in some cases, the level of skill required for this job is far higher than any other fiscal position in any other department. They must have an understanding of contract law, auditing, organizational skills, special needs of a very wide variety of departmental functions, state and federal laws and the ability to apply all of these skills quickly. They also must be able to look at departmental requests and be aware of the bigger picture. They find opportunities to assist departments that combine the resources of other areas to help their departments be successful. They also find where departments are trying to push things through without doing their job properly. They get the pleasure of being on the receiving end of complaints and ridicule because they are looking out for the taxpayer. For that alone they deserve to be paid a great deal more than they are.

For employees who have difficulty meeting job responsibilities, we have always continually worked with them to improve their performance. *That plan or the fact that a plan exists at all is not open to group discussion.* Each employee has a right to privacy and to be treated with respect regarding their deficiencies. On more than one occasion, the extent of those deficiencies was not fully realized until

those individuals were no longer employed by the office. Again, the extremely high level of work requirements does not allow for the level of oversight that would bring many of those issues to light. We depend on internal control mechanisms to assure accuracy of financial records and an employees' word they follow through as directed.

As to your recommendations, supervisory staff has been participating in management workshops provided by Personnel from my level down for the last three years. Even staff that is not currently at a management level has been included in such training to prepare them for advancement. I am pleased with the course content and find it to be excellent guidance. I have participated in numerous courses on such topics before and subsequent to that training. I am always looking for good ideas and do not feel I have learned all there is to learn certainly. Budgetary restrictions do not allow me to provide the level of opportunities I would like but I do the best I can with the funding available.

I have had staff go to Personnel with issues. I have recommended that staff go to Personnel on some issues and to the Union on others. I have personally explained the grievance process and offered it as an option and, much to the surprise of some Union reps, I actually encourage staff to become members. Retaliation is not condoned. Any employee who felt that retaliation was imminent should have discussed it with me first and with the Union if they felt I had not handled it properly.

As to the appearance and dress code issue; this is difficult. The Auditor's office is not the only department to have problems. If I had my way, they would all wear suits...then I look at what we pay them and decide that clean and covered is the best I can ask for. We, like many departments, allow a "Jean Friday". If an outfit is inappropriate, I ask the employee not to wear it again. If it is really inappropriate, I have asked that they go home and change. It has to be VERY noticeable no matter what the problem. I am a working department head and am not as observant or as critical of what someone is wearing when they are doing their job well. Shy of totally naked, I probably would not notice and/or care. When I notice the office is getting a bit casual, I do a department wide reminder of appropriate dress.

I have had employees indicate that a particular dress style was offensive and I have immediately addressed that issue. I have the ability to be direct enough that even before it was my job to do so; I got to advise staff they needed to take a bath or any number of other unpleasant tasks.

What has to be remembered is rules must apply equally to all. Some employees look really great in a particular style while others do not. Some have physical issues that are not easy to deal with. For most of my life, I have been overweight and finding appropriate clothing was difficult and costly. I am sure I have worn something too tight or too short or too revealing. That had no bearing on my ability to do my job and I feel strongly that I need to be accepting of my staff's individualities as well.

As to possibilities for reorganizing, the Board has done that as well. Some functions have been moved to more appropriate places and we continue to support the new department in any way possible. Sometimes, we simply do not have the infrastructure in place for certain functions to be appropriately placed. The Auditor has traditionally stepped up when our constituents stood to lose because of the lack of better options. We currently are only doing one function that would be better placed elsewhere and when there is a better option, we will support moving that function.

Everything else we do in our office is our job. I have provided the Board with a list of statutory requirements for the auditor and those assigned by the Board. With staff developing amazingly well, we are fulfilling our responsibilities and staff is pleased with their progress. There is not a thorough understanding of our tasks or our responsibilities by the departments, the Board or the Administrator. They are far more informed now than when I took office. As my learning curve never completes, neither does anyone else's.

As indicated initially, I feel your evaluation was well presented and a fair picture of what **was** our situation with the exception of retaliation issues.

You have summarized clearly the problems we faced **but you did not talk with me at all** to find out if I had identified the problems and what if anything, had I done to resolve them.

The reduction in staff almost put us out of business. Those that stuck it out know what we had to do to survive. Those that are new only see the results of the hard work put in to adjusting to less staff and a streamlined work flow. Those that have left only know what it was like during the crisis. I am responsible for allowing a reduction of staff. Please understand that my lack of success at reinstating those positions and subsequently the problems it caused was not within my control but in the control of our Board. Had it been my choice, you would have seen changes much earlier.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Leanna Dancer".

Leanna Dancer
Auditor-Controller-Recorder